DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 322 HE 031 315

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TITLE An Examination of Federally Supported Retention Models in American Higher Education: The Policy and the Politics.
PUB DATE 1996-07-00
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the European Access Network Conference (Amsterdam, Netherlands, July 1, 1996). Contains light type.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Persistence; *Access to Education; College Students; *Developmental Studies Programs; *Educationally Disadvantaged; High Risk Students; Higher Education; Needs Assessment; Nontraditional Students; Outcomes of Education; Policy Formation; School Holding Power; *Student College Relationship; Student Financial Aid; *Student Needs; Student Placement

ABSTRACT

This paper, presented at an international conference, addresses the ways in which the U.S. federal government has attempted since 1965 to use higher education as a means to equalize opportunity in American society. Over the years, the original federal need-based student aid programs changed and began to focus more on student supportive services and retention strategies. There are three student support services models. The first special enrollment model is found most often in four-year selective colleges and universities in which program staff members select a group of students upon which to concentrate services; in some instances program staff members are also involved in the institution's admissions and financial aid decisions. Such programs focus on two related obstacles to student success: the students' perceived academic weakness and the institution's own limitations. The second, developmental education model, found mostly in two- and four-year colleges, focuses more narrowly on students' lack of preparation; students are usually selected based on admissions test scores. The third, laboratory model, an approach most often found at publicly supported institutions with high percentages of disadvantaged students, generally relies on self-selection as a means of identifying students; programs most often concentrate on one or a group of services, such as tutoring. (MAB)

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An Examination of Federally Supported Retention Models in American Higher Education: The Policy and the Politics

The theme which brings us together today, "overcoming barriers to successful completion within higher education" underscores, in a certain sense, the dilemmas and challenges which democratic societies face on the eve of a new century. In 1965 in the United States, the federal government embarked on a strategy to utilize higher education as a means to equalize opportunities in American society.[1] Ironically, thirty years later, some now argue that low-income students may actually be ill-served when access policies are put in place without regard to completion, or what, in current American policy jargon, is often referred to as "outcomes" or "quality."[2] Simply stated, this signifies to me that there is a growing recognition that, for many years, federal higher education policy may have been weighted more heavily toward need-based

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[1] Gladieux, Lawrence E. and Wolanin, Thomas R. ***Congress and the Colleges: The National Politics of Higher Education*** (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1976), pp. 12-13.

[2] Gladieux, Lawrence E. and Hauptman, Arthur M. ***The College Aid Quandary: Access, Quality, and the Federal Role*** (Washington: The Brookings Institution/The College Board, 1995), p. 33.

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financial aid, particularly loans, than toward supportive service and retention strategies, and that this may have had consequences in terms of the ability of low-income students to succeed in college. Future policies may require more sensitivity to an array of factors, including making grants rather than loans the principal form of financial aid for low-income students particularly.

This rethinking of educational opportunity policy should not be construed as the abandonment of a policy that failed. It did not. By any measure, the emphasis on access improved the quality of American life by increasing economic productivity and promoting greater social cohesion, not to mention bringing our nation closer to its historic ideals. Instead, the shift in emphasis from access to retention reflects, in short, a maturing of American social policy based on concrete experiences and realities.

Candidly, I am encouraged by this shift in thinking, not because an emphasis on economic barriers to full college participation is inappropriate. Adequate financial aid remains an

essential aspect of access for poor students. However, I believe this shift will lead to a greater appreciation of the class and cultural barriers that underrepresented groups face in their quest for a baccalaureate degree, and, at the same time, provide the basis and impulse for re-examining the relationship between students from under represented groups and the colleges they are entering in terms of climate, curriculum, and structure. Just as important, of course, is the effect this shift in emphasis might have in bringing greater recognition and importance to the work of access staffs particularly, and developmental education generally.

As executive director of an association comprised of administrators, faculty, and counselors of American access programs, my role in federal policy discussions is to represent the interests of low-income students who want a chance to graduate from college and the perspective of access program staff.

So as to better understand my outlook and convictions, let me point out that NCEOA's membership, and the class and ethnic groups

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our members identify with, have historically not been involved until fairly recently in shaping or affecting American higher education policy either on campuses or in Washington. We owe our place today in national policy discussions, in part, to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, to the antipoverty movement of the same period, and to the egalitarian traditions within the United States which drove the establishment of land grant colleges and state universities in the nineteenth century.

Before I discuss the specifics of three federally-supported models in the United States, I want to share with you my views regarding the interrelationships between higher education policy in the United States and the role of my organization (the National Council of Educational Opportunity Associations) in influencing that policy. Additionally, I want to take a moment to describe how access programs are organized at the federal level within the United States. This, in turn, will provide you a context to better understand the variations and nuances of the models which I have

selected to examine.

The principal set of access programs in the United States is the Federal TRIO Programs. Almost a half-billion dollars has been appropriated by the Federal government to support close to 1,800 TRIO programs operating in 1,100 colleges and universities and 150 community agencies, serving 780,000 students in this school year. And, since 1965, the federal government has invested a total of $5.3 billion dollars in the TRIO programs, serving over 10 million students.

These programs draw their legislative authority from the Higher Education Act of 1965[3] which, as Dr. Wolanin discussed earlier today, also provides authority for student financial aid programs. In fact, TRIO, is organically related to student aid both in its legislative placement and in its underlying rationale. While the student financial assistance programs address the financial obstacles low-income students face in attaining a college

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[3] P.L. 92-318 as amended, Higher Education Act of 1965, Title IV.

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degree, TRIO addresses the non-financial barriers to access and completion.

Conceptually, TRIO must be seen as one program which incorporates four distinct strategies to achieve the goal of collegiate access and completion. Three of the TRIO strategies -- Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Educational Opportunity Centers -- are pre-collegiate. They work with individuals of different ages, with different levels of intensity, to inform these individuals about college and prepare them for enrollment. Talent Search, for example, begins working with children as young as eleven; Upward Bound focuses on more intensive academic services for high school students under the age of 19; and Educational Opportunity Centers provide information, counseling, and other services to adults. And over 700 Student Support Services projects, which will be the central focus of this paper, are designed to assure that low-income and disabled students already enrolled in college (whether or not they received services from

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other TRIO projects) are retained through graduation.

The contributions of TRIO to higher education can be understood in two ways. One the one hand, TRIO has played an important role and has had a distinct impact on the development and application of educational methods and services that have led to greater numbers of low-income, minority, and disabled students achieving and succeeding in America's colleges. On the other hand, access staff, in order to remain faithful to the intentions and goals of the framers of the original legislation in 1965, had to become involved in the federal political process. Their involvement served as a counterweight to the resistance and skepticism TRIO encountered from some segments of American society who have benefitted, and continue to benefit, from the traditional conceptions and practices of higher education. Initially, this meant the formation of a cohesive interest group that included most, if not all, of those ethnic, racial, and socio-economic groups that had not fully participated in American higher education

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prior to 1965. For them, it also meant the adoption of political tools and skills so as to better defend and advance the efforts of TRIO.

How Did the Lobby Develop?

Clearly, the development and growth of the TRIO community's capacity to influence the federal government, particularly the Congress, is intertwined with the evolution of the policy formulations and actions of the government itself. Each annual appropriations bill to fund federal education programs and each reauthorization of the Higher Education Act were used by the leadership of the TRIO community to energize and educate the community regarding the intricacies of the federal education policy process. In short, the Higher Education Act of 1965 not only authorized TRIO activities, but it also inspired a new class of professional educators whose vision was linked to the rhetoric and ideals of the reform movements inside the United States in the 1960's.

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The introduction of TRIO to America's colleges and universities in 1965 brought to campuses a new set of administrators and instructors -- mainly from ethnic and racial minorities. They were charged with implementing the federal policy of equal educational opportunity, but by the early 1970's, public support for this goal and their efforts was beginning to wane. On campuses, concerns were being raised that attempts to make college opportunities available to the "new" student were precipitating a lowering of standards, or, as some put it, causing a "dumbing down" of the curriculum or the university itself. TRIO and TRIO staff were being undermined by the backlash against the goals of President Johnson's Great Society. Moreover, their attempts to respond politically to this backlash -- usually by adopting the slogans and tactics of the Black, Brown, and Red Consciousness movements' -- further isolated and marginalized TRIO staff, both on campuses and in the national policy debate.

By 1974, the federal government had frozen the appropriation

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for TRIO. It remained frozen for three years. In the meantime, the United States Office of Education continued to bring TRIO staff together for the purposes of professional development and to orient them regarding compliance with the regulations governing the use of these federal grants. At these government-sponsored meetings, activists found a set of principles to begin to build a cohesive community -- transforming grantees with no common identity, nor allegiance to one another, into an organized interest group. First, they constructed an identity by emphasizing their commonality of functions. Later, they took steps to subordinate their ethnic and racial identities by defining their purpose in terms of their commitment to low-income students.

In the process of developing a consensus around the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in the late 1970's, the loose conglomerate of state and regionally-based TRIO associations were galvanized into a national group. Consistent with their commitment to disadvantaged students, the movement recommended to

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Congress in the 1980 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, that TRIO eligibility (the basis by which TRIO participants are chosen) should be redefined to focus on just three categories: (1) low-income students, (2) students whose parents had not received a baccalaureate, and (3) disabled students.

Congress's adoption of this policy recommendation had several significant implications. First, it gave Congress a clear picture of who benefitted from TRIO. Since the eligibility criteria did not include race or ethnic-specific language, it disassociated TRIO from the emerging affirmative action debates and controversy. At the same time, Congress's sanctions of these criteria affirmed the TRIO community's consensus around the notion of economically disadvantaged students as opposed to students who were disadvantaged by their minority status. All in all, this had the political effect of giving TRIO a moral claim that resonated beyond the classrooms and the halls of Congress.

United by the successes of the 1980 reauthorization and

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challenged by the election of a conservative President, the TRIO community quickly set up a Washington headquarters in the spring of 1981. This action was fortuitous because the new President sought to dismantle TRIO for the eight years he was in office. The TRIO community was able to defeat this conservative campaign in large part because the Washington office could provide up-to-date information about the timing of key decisions so that the TRIO constituency was always well positioned to bring concerted and intense pressure on the decision-makers in Congress. The grassroots were rapidly mobilized, and they in turn called, wrote, and met with Members of Congress, keeping Congressing informed about the merits and successes of TRIO and effectively countered the aims of the conservative regime.

Because the TRIO community met the challenges of the 1980's, they were able to secure a 40% increase in the funds appropriated for TRIO during those years. The visibility and confidence gained by their successes in the 1980's gave the TRIO community sufficient

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momentum to press for ever larger funding increases to serve more disadvantaged students by the end of that decade. In fact, since 1989, the TRIO appropriation has increased 115%.

Three Models

While these policy battles were being waged, TRIO staffs improved and strengthened all of their access and retention strategies. Today, when we look at the Student Support Services strategy, which, as I noted earlier, speaks most directly to the theme of this conference, there are three models that are the most prevalent. We are going to refer to them as the ▒special enrollment model,▒ the ▒developmental education model,▒ and the ▒laboratory model.▒

The Special Enrollment Model

The ▒special enrollment▒ model is found more often in four-year selective colleges and universities, particularly those where

the percentage of low-income and/or minority students enrolled is relatively small compared to the total undergraduate student body. In such cases, the institution chooses a group of students upon whom to concentrate services, based upon a number of factors ranging from internal or external political pressures to an analysis of institutional retention and graduation data. Typically, institutions adopting this model focus on minority students or students from certain secondary schools known for the weakness of their academic programs.

In the most comprehensive of such special admission projects[1], the Student Support Services staff is involved both in the decision of the institution to admit a student and in the amount of financial aid that student receives. Special recruiters visit secondary schools to explain the advantages of Student Support Services participation to students and their success in college.

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[1] An excellent example of a special enrollment project is the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The EOP project encompasses many of the features of the most comprehensive type of special enrollment model.

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A student's admission to the institution is usually contingent on their participation in the services offered by Student Support Services.

This model recognizes two sets of related obstacles which may impact on a student's ability to continue in school and graduate. The first set of issues relates to perceived weaknesses in the student, such as their academic preparation, time management skills or familiarity with academic expectations. The second set of issues relates to limitations in the institution itself. Student Support Services staff recognize the institution as a somewhat hostile and alien environment, and work to establish a peer and professional support system which assists students in coping with such an environment.

For institutions which have adopted this approach, the majority of students accepted for a given academic year are expected to participate in a summer program in the weeks preceding their arrival on campus. During these summer sessions, students

attend some combination of remedial and regular university course work. Equally important, Student Support Services staff use this opportunity to develop personal relationships with these students and seek to encourage the development of a positive community identity among them. Student advisors drawn from previous classes work with entering students and make themselves available as a network of support.

Following the summer session, students enrolled in Student Support Services utilizing this model are expected to maintain regular contact with the staff. In the most comprehensive efforts, staff members also extensively monitor each student's academic performance throughout the year, and serve as the primary academic advisors for first-year students. Other staff contact might be structured in academic supports such as special remedial course work, attendance at skills laboratories or workshops which supplement regular course work, or tutoring attached to specific courses. Typically, entering students are also assigned an upper

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division student as a mentor or tutor who is expected to monitor that student's progress, provide an additional warning when the student experiences difficulty, and generally provide appropriate encouragement, advice and support. Students might also participate in cultural or recreational activities, which are designed to reinforce the student's identification with Student Support Services and the campus as a whole.

Unlike the other two models which I will discuss, students typically receive support from a Student Support Services of this type through their graduation. However, in general, upper division students receive significantly less support and have significantly less contact with the staff than do first-year students.

The Developmental Education Model

While a special enrollment model is more typical of four-year selective colleges with smaller percentages of low-income or minority students, Student Support Services strategiess following a ▒developmental education model▒ are found in both two- and four-

year colleges. The "developmental education" approach tends to be found in institutions with wide variances in the numbers and percentages of low-income and minority students enrolled.

While special admission projects are built on a conceptual framework which recognizes both student and institutional weaknesses, developmental education methodologies, by their nature, focus much more narrowly on the students' lack of academic preparation. Typically, students are selected for these Student Support Services projects on the basis of admissions test scores. Students then enroll in a group of interrelated transitional courses which bridge their entry into the institution. Such courses are most often offered in composition, algebra, and reading and study skills with the goal of building students' competency in one or more areas.

Although these developmental courses might be offered either in the summer or in the regular academic year, the latter approach predominates. Most often, Student Support Services projects which

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utilize a developmental instruction model complement these course offerings with other services, particularly academic advising and tutoring. Programs which employ a developmental education model are likely to focus almost all of their services in the student's first year.

The Laboratory Model

In contrast to the models discussed above, many Student Support Services projects follow a laboratory model. This third approach relies on self-selection as a means of identifying students. Generally, individuals who meet TRIO's low-income, first-generation, or disability eligibility criteria are sent letters inviting them to take advantage of the services made available by the Student Support Services project. Faculty are also advised of the availability of services and asked to refer students who are experiencing difficulties in their classes.

In contrast to Student Support Services projects utilizing the ▒special enrollment▒ or ▒developmental education▒ models,

laboratory projects most often concentrate on one service or group of services. For example, such a project might provide tutoring services or, at two year colleges, special assistance in preparing for and completing the requirements to transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution. Laboratory model projects are most often found at publically-supported institutions with high percentages of disadvantaged students.

Summary of Themes

Let me turn finally to a brief discussion regarding what makes a strategy focused on college completion an effective strategy. The most basic point, of course, is that decisions regarding the design of effective completion strategies must make sense in the concrete situation in which they must operate. Dr. Vincent Tinto, formerly Director of the National Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment in Higher Education at Syracuse University, argues that it is critical to approach retention by rejecting the provision of discrete steps. Instead, the key to developing an

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effective completion strategy resides in the ability of the faculty and staff to apply what is known about student retention to the specific situation.[6]

Certainly each of us attending this conference shares an understanding of the complexity of the task facing access staff. In the United States, policy makers are increasingly recognizing this complexity. Just last year, Larry Gladieux, an astute observer of federal higher education policy, captured the essence of this issue when he wrote: "We... know more today about the complexity of the college-going process. Enrollment and success in higher education are functions of many factors -- academic aptitude and prior schooling, family and community attitudes, motivation, and awareness of opportunities -- not just ability to pay."

But it is also important to recognize that as one develops retention models, ideology also plays a part. Some individuals

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[6]Tinto, V. Leaving College: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987)

[7]Gladieux, Lawrence E. and Hauptman, Arthur M. ***The College Aid Quandary: Access, Quality, and the Federal Role*** (Washington: The Brookings Institution/The College Board, 1995), p. 31.

approach retention as if all of the deficits were in the student -- that low-income students do not have the academic preparation, the value system, or the family support to be successful in college. Others address the issue of retention from the other end of the ideological spectrum, as if all the deficits were in the colleges and universities themselves. They argue that ethnocentrism and institutional policies which disregard the needs of teachers and students account for much of the completion problem. In my view, it is probably appropriate to recognize that deficits exist in both students and institutions, and that completion models should address both these needs. The models discussed earlier each do that to a greater or lesser extent.

Others would agree with me, like Dr. F. M. Dunston, a researcher who has looked closely at retention issues, who has concluded that universities have had varying experiences related to retention patterns; that a vast array of independent variables have been used to explain retention; and that there is no standard model

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of variable inclusion and even less consistency in the conceptualization of how these variables are interrelated. In short, Dunston emphasizes that successful retention methods must continue to rely on tentative modes of analysis -- there are no absolutes.[8]

In sum, my review strongly suggests that retention models must be flexible and sensitive to the individual circumstances of the students they serve and the institutional circumstances in which they are located. The array of variables which may impede retention and completion in higher education is extremely complex, and different students may have widely differing experiences at the same institution. A successful retention strategy needs to take into account not only the possible deficits which disadvantaged students may bring to college, but also the institutional obstacles a student may face once he or she arrives. Finally, access program staff must recognize the ways in which personal and institutional

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[8]Dunston, F.M. Review of the literature: Black student retention in higher education institutions. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Research and Evaluation Associates, 1983)

circumstances interact to create barriers which are particular to each individual student. Because disadvantaged students' experience with higher education is so complicated, retention models cannot be simple either. Only by addressing the circumstances of disadvantaged students sensitively and thoughtfully can access programs and institutions of higher education truly provide real access and opportunity to disadvantaged students.

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